Place-Based Integrated Water Resources Planning: Pilot Program and Recommendations

What is Place-Based Planning?

In 2015, the Oregon Legislature passed ORS 536.220, which gave the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) authority to make grants and provide technical assistance to communities to engage in place-based planning. The pilot program gave Oregon communities an opportunity to assess the needs of instream and out-of-stream water interests in their area and reach agreement on how to meet those needs. The resulting state-local partnerships developed water resources plans that are community-driven, but which draw on the knowledge of outside resource experts as well as community members.

In 2021, OWRD contracted with the National Policy Consensus Center and Oregon State University to evaluate the pilot program. Key findings and recommendations from the evaluation are described below.

Outcomes

Status of Action Plans

Upper Grande Ronde: Local approval and state recognition
Lower John Day: Local approval; in review by state agencies
Mid-Coast: Local approval; in review by state agencies
Harney Basin: Draft groundwater plan; surface water section in preparation.

Place-based planning:

- Brought together diverse water interests that previously had not worked together.

- Helped the pilot planning groups gain local support and buy-in for plan implementation.

- Created a network of individuals and groups within the pilot communities who are knowledgeable about and active in water planning

- Identified critical data gaps that need to be filled

- Improved agency understandings of local needs and local understanding of agency constraints

- Enabled the planning groups to develop pathways for achieving their water resources goals.

Pilot Program Background
In 2016, the Oregon Water Resources Department awarded place-based planning grants to the following planning groups:
- *Lower John Day Place-Based Partnership*
- *Harney Community-Based Water Planning Collaborative*
- *Upper Grande Ronde River Watershed Partnership*
- *Mid-Coast Water Planning Partnership*

State agencies involved:
- *OWRD (lead agency)*
- *Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA)*
- *Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW)*
- *Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (ODEQ)*

Pilot Program Results
Use of the OWRD's planning framework enabled the groups to:
- *Establish governance structures and processes*
- *Improve understanding of local water resources and needs*
- *Identify strategies to address needs and produce locally approved plans.*

However, the Harney Basin group, which was in an area experiencing a groundwater crisis, found the framework very challenging to use.

Conclusion*: OWRD's place-based planning model is useful in some contexts but areas with existing water challenges may need a different place-based approach.*

Recommendations

1. Provide consistent and sufficient funding for planning groups and core state agencies

The planning groups identified a need for secure state funding to allow them to stay focused on plan development, instead of having to periodically divert their energy toward fundraising. The groups emphasized the importance of adequate funding to hire staff or consultants to address critical gaps in local skills and knowledge.

The core state agencies (i.e., OWRD, ODA, ODEQ, ODFW) lacked the resources needed to respond to technical assistance requests in a timely manner, and many had insufficient staff to engage fully as planning group members. Planning groups emphasized that involvement of all four agencies as stakeholders during planning meetings is critical since each has a distinct role to play in water management.

2. Incorporate a pre-planning component into the place-based planning framework.

The pilot program designers greatly underestimated the time that it would take the pilot planning groups to develop place-based Water Resources Action Plans. Key factors that slowed down the planning process included:

- Lack of trust between the planning groups and stage agencies, as well as among stakeholders;
- Limited capacity of the core state agencies to provide data, analyses and planning guidance;
- Limited capacity of the planning groups to engage in highly technical planning.

Participants called for incorporating a pre-planning component, or Step Zero, into the state's five-step planning framework which would include: a) a trust-building component, b) pre-packaging of data and analyses needed for plan development, c) development of context-appropriate planning guidance, and d) identification of gaps in local and state agency core competencies and development of strategies for filling those gaps.

3. Prioritize state capacity to engage in place-based planning.

The state agencies involved in place-based planning are structured and operate in ways that are not consistently conducive to working as partners in locally led planning processes and agency priorities do not always align with place-based planning needs.

Addressing these impediments to place-based planning requires a) support from mid and upper-level leadership in the core state agencies, b) greater vertical integration within agencies, and c) alignment of work plan priorities across the agencies. Place-based planning needs to be part of agency staff's job descriptions to ensure clear understanding of their responsibilities in the program. Agency staff will need to acquire new skill sets, such as how to engage with communities in place-based planning and how to build trust between state agencies and community members.

4. Develop alternative approaches for areas experiencing a chronic water crisis.

The pilot place-based planning program was not designed to address situations in which water is already seriously overallocated. The pilot program shows that project areas with existing water challenges, such as the Harney Basin, need a different place-based approach than areas with little or no apparent water resources challenges. Upfront discussion between OWRD and planning groups is needed to identify the goals the planning groups hope to accomplish and the expectations of the state so that an appropriate approach can be identified.

"I really appreciate the four groups for struggling and powering through the difficult conversations and decisions that needed to be made. Today we're in a much better place for the state to follow suit. And it's because of these groups…. The groups have helped the state see data gaps and get to a better place for providing support." State agency participant

This Fact Sheet was developed by the National Policy Consensus Center to supplement its independent evaluation of the pilot-phase of place-based integrated water resources planning.